



Meaning without Reference: The Snark as a Non-Referring Sign in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*

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Abstract— Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* has long been read as playful nonsense or cryptic allegory, but such approaches overlook the poem's most unsettling feature: meaning persists even when reference becomes impossible. This paper argues that the Snark functions as a non-referring sign. It is a signifier that generates belief, authority, and coordinated social action whilst systematically foreclosing any stable referential ground. Drawing on close textual analysis and Wittgensteinian concepts of language-games and rule-following, the essay demonstrates that meaning in the poem does not collapse through semantic chaos or lexical excess. Instead, it unravels precisely through the successful execution of a fully public, rule-governed linguistic practice. The hunting party follows procedures, heeds warnings, and maintains collective confidence without ever establishing what the Snark actually is. The Bellman's authority rests not upon knowledge but on procedural maintenance. When the Baker finally encounters the creature, the moment of supposed confirmation becomes one of disappearance: 'For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.' This semantic catastrophe exposes a profound fragility in linguistic certainty. Carroll's poem reveals that language can remain operationally coherent and socially binding even when it lacks any survivable referential anchor. Far from mere whimsy, *The Hunting of the Snark* emerges as a radical literary experiment in meaning without reference, dramatising the unsettling possibility that we may speak meaningfully together about something that cannot survive being found.



Keywords— language-games, nonsense literature, reference, rule-following, semantics, Wittgenstein.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) has long resisted stable critical classification. The poem is frequently grouped with Carroll's other nonsense compositions and is often approached as playful absurdity, satirical fantasy, or semantic indeterminacy (Lecerle; Sewell). Such readings, whilst attentive to the poem's comic surface and linguistic inventiveness, tend to proceed from an assumption that remains insufficiently examined: that the poem's central object, the Snark, either conceals a recoverable referent or signifies nothing at all. This paper challenges that assumption. It does not ask what the Snark 'really' is. Instead, it asks a more radical question: what kind of linguistic object must something be in order to destroy its own conditions of reference? In this respect, the poem is not merely whimsical or elusive. It stages a sustained and

disquieting inquiry into the relation between naming, procedure, and meaning. Critical accounts of Carrollian nonsense have traditionally emphasised either linguistic excess or semantic vacancy. Jean-Jacques Lecerle describes nonsense as a form of 'regulated violence against language', thereby foregrounding its destabilising relation to ordinary sense (Lecerle). Elizabeth Sewell similarly treats nonsense as a mode governed by internal patterning rather than referential transparency (Sewell). These formulations illuminate the playful instability of Carroll's idiom, yet they do not fully account for the peculiar seriousness of *The Hunting of the Snark*. The Snark is not merely linguistically unruly; it commands belief, fear, preparation, and disciplined pursuit. The poem stages an elaborate social enterprise that is complete with roles, criteria, and procedural authority and is centred on an object

whose apparent discovery culminates not in knowledge but in disappearance (Carroll).

This study argues that the Snark functions as a non-referring sign. It is a signifier that generates meaning-effects whilst structurally foreclosing stable reference. Meaning in *The Hunting of the Snark* does not collapse because of indeterminacy, ambiguity, or misuse. Rather, it collapses through the successful execution of its own procedures. The poem is therefore better understood not as a puzzle to be decoded, nor as a mere instance of literary nonsense, but as a radical experiment in meaning without reference.

Research Rationale

The rationale for this study is based in the need to reassess the theoretical assumptions underlying critical treatments of literary nonsense. Existing scholarship has tended to approach Carroll's poem either as a playful exercise in semantic destabilisation or as a coded allegory awaiting interpretative recovery. Both approaches, however, presuppose that the poem's meaning must ultimately reside either in referential clarity or in deliberate referential chaos. This binary framework obscures a more complex possibility: that Carroll's text stages a linguistic situation in which meaning persists as a social and procedural phenomenon even when reference becomes structurally impossible.

This research is further justified by the poem's continued relevance to philosophical debates concerning language, rule-following, and semantic certainty. By analysing *The Hunting of the Snark* through the lens of language-game theory and rule-following considerations, this study aims to demonstrate that Carroll's nonsense offers more than literary amusement. It provides a literary exploration of how linguistic practices can remain operationally coherent whilst lacking stable referential foundations. The hunting expedition functions as a sustained thought experiment in the social dimensions of meaning, exposing the fragility of linguistic certainty when procedural correctness is detached from survivable referential grounding.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nonsense and the Problem of Meaning

The critical tradition surrounding Carroll's nonsense writing has frequently treated semantic instability as its defining characteristic. Lecercle describes literary nonsense as a mode that deliberately violates the norms governing ordinary language, creating what he terms a 'regulated violence' against linguistic order (Lecercle). In this view, nonsense does not simply abandon meaning;

rather, it destabilises the rules through which meaning ordinarily emerges.

Sewell's earlier study of nonsense literature likewise emphasises the patterned nature of nonsense discourse. For Sewell, nonsense is not chaotic but governed by its own internal structures and constraints. These structures generate an alternative form of intelligibility that differs from referential language whilst still remaining recognisable as language (Sewell). Carroll's works frequently illustrate this paradox: the surface of nonsense may appear absurd, but it continues to operate through grammatically coherent sentences, recognisable narrative forms, and stable linguistic procedures.

Such accounts illuminate an important aspect of Carroll's writing, yet they do not fully explain the peculiar structure of *The Hunting of the Snark*. Unlike many nonsense texts that foreground verbal play, Carroll's poem constructs an elaborate collective enterprise centred upon a single object of pursuit. The hunting party does not treat the Snark as a whimsical fiction; they treat it as an object whose existence commands preparation, caution, and methodical action. The central difficulty of the poem therefore lies not merely in linguistic absurdity but in the tension between procedural certainty and referential uncertainty.

As Wim Tigges observes, literary nonsense typically operates through a delicate balance between recognisable linguistic patterns and elements that resist interpretative closure (Tigges). Readers are able to follow the narrative and understand the procedures governing the hunt even though the object of that hunt remains elusive. The poem thus maintains intelligibility at the level of linguistic structure whilst simultaneously destabilising the referential expectations that normally accompany such structure.

Allegorical Interpretations and Their Limits

Because the poem appears to withhold referential clarity, critics have frequently attempted to recover a hidden meaning beneath its playful surface. A long tradition of interpretation has treated *The Hunting of the Snark* as a form of allegory. In such readings, the Snark becomes a symbolic stand-in for some more determinate object: philosophical truth, existential anxiety, the pursuit of knowledge, or the dangers of intellectual overreach.

These allegorical interpretations are understandable. Carroll's poem invites speculation by providing fragments of descriptive language that appear to gesture towards a coherent meaning without ever confirming one. Yet allegorical readings encounter a persistent difficulty. Allegory typically depends upon a stable correspondence between sign and referent. In *The Hunting of the Snark*, however, the poem systematically

undermines the possibility of such correspondence. The Snark is repeatedly named, described, and pursued, but these descriptions never accumulate into a coherent referential identity.

The tension between procedural certainty and referential absence suggests that the interpretative impulse itself may be part of the poem's design. Rather than concealing a hidden allegorical meaning, *The Hunting of the Snark* may instead dramatise the conditions under which meaning becomes impossible to stabilise.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this article employs a multi-layered semantic analysis situated within the broader framework of philosophy of language and literary theory. This study adopts an interpretative paradigm that interlinks close textual analysis with concepts drawn from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy and Saul Kripke's influential reading of Wittgenstein on rules and private language.

The primary text, *The Hunting of the Snark*, is read as a literary staging of linguistic practices that foreground the relationship between naming, procedure, and reference. To evaluate the poem's treatment of meaning, the study uses a phenomenological approach that attends to the hunters' shared behaviours, linguistic exchanges, and procedural commitments rather than seeking a hidden allegorical referent. The analysis utilises Wittgenstein's concept of language-games to examine how meaning emerges from participation in rule-governed social practices, even when those practices lack secure referential anchorage. Kripke's exposition of rule-following provides a supplementary framework for understanding how the poem dramatises the relationship between communal agreement and semantic certainty.

The Snark as a Non-Referring Sign

Naming Without Reference

Throughout *The Hunting of the Snark*, the central object of the expedition is repeatedly named but never successfully identified. The hunters speak of the Snark with apparent confidence, yet the poem provides no stable set of characteristics by which the creature might be recognised. The Bellman's instructions emphasise the importance of method and caution, but these instructions do not culminate in any definitive description of the object itself. Instead, the language surrounding the Snark consists of fragmentary hints, warnings, and speculative remarks (Carroll).

This peculiar situation raises an important linguistic question: what happens when a name circulates within a community without securing a determinate referent? In ordinary language, naming typically

presupposes some form of shared reference. In Carroll's poem, however, the name 'Snark' appears to function without ever establishing such a referential anchor.

The hunters nevertheless behave as though the name were perfectly meaningful. They organise an expedition, distribute roles, and follow a series of procedures designed to facilitate the hunt. The name therefore operates as a coordinating linguistic device rather than as a transparent label for a stable object. The crew's collective activity depends not on knowing what the Snark is, but on sharing the conviction that the name refers to something worth pursuing.

Carroll's poem carefully reproduces this social dimension of naming. The members of the hunting party appear to share a common understanding of the term 'Snark', even though the poem never provides a description capable of fixing its identity. The name circulates within the group as a point of coordination: it justifies the expedition, organises the hunters' actions, and structures their expectations about what they might encounter. Naming thus becomes an activity that generates practical coherence without securing semantic certainty.

Procedural Authority and the Bellman

The Bellman occupies a central role in sustaining this linguistic arrangement. As the leader of the expedition, he provides the instructions and warnings that guide the hunters' actions. Yet his authority does not derive from possessing privileged knowledge about the Snark. Instead, it arises from his ability to articulate and maintain the procedures that structure the hunt.

The Bellman's authority is reinforced by the fact that the hunters appear willing to accept his procedural guidance without demanding epistemic justification. His instructions are followed not because he provides a definitive account of the Snark, but because he establishes the rules through which the hunt becomes possible. The crew's confidence in these procedures allows the expedition to proceed despite the persistent absence of referential clarity.

This dynamic highlights an important feature of the poem's linguistic structure. Meaning within the hunting expedition is sustained by shared participation in a rule-governed practice rather than by access to privileged knowledge. The hunters trust the procedures of the hunt even when the object of that hunt remains obscure. As a result, the Bellman's authority rests on maintaining the continuity of these procedures rather than on revealing new information about the creature itself.

The Bellman's instructions are striking for their emphasis on method rather than knowledge. The hunters are

repeatedly reminded to follow certain practices, to remain cautious, and to remain attentive to the possibility that the Snark might in fact be a Boojum (Carroll). These instructions create a framework within which the expedition can proceed even though the object of the hunt remains uncertain.

Such a structure resonates with Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following and linguistic practice, particularly the idea that meaning is sustained through public forms of agreement rather than through private acts of reference (Wittgenstein). Within the poem, the Bellman functions as the figure who preserves this agreement. His instructions stabilise the linguistic framework within which the hunters can continue to speak meaningfully about the Snark even though its identity remains uncertain.

Language-Games and Rule-Following

Wittgenstein's concept of language-games provides a useful framework for understanding the linguistic dynamics of Carroll's poem. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is not determined by a fixed referent but by its use within a form of life—a shared social practice governed by public rules (Wittgenstein). Language-games derive their coherence not from correspondence to external objects but from the regularity of their application within a community.

In *The Hunting of the Snark*, the hunting expedition constitutes precisely such a language-game. The participants share a set of rules, expectations, and behavioural norms that enable them to coordinate their actions meaningfully. The term 'Snark' derives its significance not from a stable referent but from its role within this shared practice. The hunters know how to use the term appropriately within the context of the expedition, even though they cannot identify its referent with certainty.

Kripke's influential reading of Wittgenstein emphasises that rule-following is fundamentally a social phenomenon. For Kripke, the possibility of meaning depends upon the existence of a community that can judge whether a speaker is following a rule correctly (Kripke). Meaning is not a private mental state but a publicly observable practice subject to communal standards of correctness.

Carroll's poem dramatises both the power and the fragility of this arrangement. The hunting expedition demonstrates that a community can sustain meaningful discourse through shared rule-following even when the supposed object of that discourse remains elusive. Yet the poem also reveals the limits of this arrangement. The language-game of the hunt functions smoothly for most of the poem, enabling the hunters to coordinate their actions and maintain collective belief in the meaningfulness of their

enterprise. However, when the system attempts to anchor itself in an actual encounter with its supposed referent, it collapses.

The Boojum and Semantic Catastrophe

The fragile equilibrium sustaining the hunt ultimately collapses with the introduction of the Boojum. The Bellman repeatedly warns that some Snarks are in fact Boojums, and that encountering such a creature will result in the sudden disappearance of the hunter (Carroll). This warning initially appears as one more procedural detail within the structure of the expedition. Yet it eventually becomes the mechanism through which the poem reveals the consequences of its peculiar linguistic arrangement.

When the Baker finally encounters the creature he has been pursuing, the anticipated moment of discovery never occurs. Instead of providing confirmation or clarification, the encounter leads to his immediate disappearance: 'For the Snark was a Boojum, you see' (Carroll). The result is not knowledge but absence.

This moment exposes the fundamental instability of the linguistic practice that had sustained the hunt. The entire expedition had been organised around the expectation that the Snark could eventually be encountered and recognised. Yet the very moment that should have secured reference instead eliminates the subject capable of confirming it.

The Boojum therefore represents what might be described as semantic catastrophe. The linguistic system governing the hunt functions smoothly for most of the poem, enabling the hunters to coordinate their actions and maintain collective belief in the meaningfulness of their enterprise. However, when the system attempts to anchor itself in an actual referent, it collapses. The hunt does not fail because its rules are violated; it fails because those rules succeed in guiding the hunters towards an object that cannot be meaningfully encountered.

Carroll's poem thus dramatises a striking paradox: language can sustain social order, authority, and coordinated action even when its supposed referential foundation proves impossible to secure. The disappearance of the Baker reveals the ultimate consequence of this arrangement. The language-game of the hunt remains coherent and rule-governed, yet it cannot survive contact with the very object it purports to be about.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Hunting of the Snark has often been read as an example of literary nonsense whose apparent absurdity resists coherent interpretation. Such readings have emphasised the poem's playful linguistic surface or sought

to recover a hidden allegorical meaning beneath it. Whilst these approaches illuminate important aspects of Carroll's writing, they do not fully account for the peculiar structure of the poem's central object. The Snark is neither a recoverable symbol nor a simple instance of semantic chaos. Rather, it functions as a signifier that sustains collective belief and coordinated action whilst withholding the possibility of stable reference.

The analysis presented in this paper has argued that the poem constructs a linguistic situation in which procedural certainty coexists with referential absence. The hunters share rules, warnings, and expectations that enable them to organise their expedition with remarkable confidence. The authority of the Bellman derives not from possessing knowledge about the Snark but from maintaining the procedures that guide the hunt. Meaning within the poem therefore emerges from participation in a shared linguistic practice rather than from direct contact with a clearly identifiable object. The appearance of the Boojum ultimately reveals the fragility of this arrangement. The moment that should confirm the reality of the Snark instead produces disappearance, eliminating the very subject who might have verified the referent. The encounter does not resolve the hunt but exposes the structural limits of the linguistic system that had sustained it. In this sense, the poem does not simply frustrate interpretation; it dramatises the consequences of a linguistic practice that functions successfully whilst lacking a survivable referential foundation. Seen in this light, *The Hunting of the Snark* offers more than a playful exercise in nonsense. Carroll's poem becomes a subtle literary exploration of how meaning can persist within a community even when the object that supposedly grounds that meaning cannot be secured. The hunters' enterprise continues for most of the poem because their linguistic practices remain intact. Yet the disappearance of the Baker reveals that such practices ultimately depend upon a referential stability that the poem itself refuses to provide. Carroll's text thus exposes a paradox at the heart of linguistic certainty. Language may remain socially effective, procedurally ordered, and collectively meaningful even when it fails to anchor itself securely in the world it claims to describe. The Snark, in this sense, is not merely an elusive creature but a literary demonstration of the fragile boundary between meaningful discourse and semantic collapse.

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